

1 SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR SELECTING A
2 VACATION DESTINATION

3
4 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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6 1. Field of the Invention

7 This invention relates broadly to a system and method for
8 data processing. More particularly, this invention relates to an
9 interactive system and method to facilitate the selection of a
10 vacation destination and accommodation by a consumer.

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12 2. State of the Art

13 There are a number of options available to a consumer over
14 the Internet to provide the consumer assistance in certain aspects
15 of vacation (or holiday) planning. Some sites offer essays on
16 numerous destinations. Wading through the available materials
17 turns vacation planning into a research project. At the other
18 extreme are online booking agent sites which locate airfares and
19 hotels for a stated destination and then permit the consumer to
20 book reservations. These online booking sites provide minimal
21 assistance for the consumer who does not know where he or she
22 wants to vacation or what kind of vacation he or she wants to
23 have. Between the extremes exist myriad other sites which provide
24 a range of services.

1 For example, several 'personal advisor' sites, e.g.,
2 www.allexperts.com and www.egulliver.com, provide specialists who
3 correspond with consumers via email to provide suggestions on
4 vacation destinations. The specialists are typically freelance
5 travel consultants who help plan and arrange the travel. However,
6 the response time is relatively slow and the recommendation is
7 only as good as the individual specialist.

8
9 Other sites, e.g., www.personalogic.com, utilize a structured
10 questionnaire in which consumers rate their preferences (e.g.,
11 from 'strong' to 'weak') on a number of vacation criteria. One of
12 the preferences is to what general geographical destination the
13 consumer wants to travel. The preferences are then extrapolated
14 into recommendations. This analytical methodology provides
15 unconvincing results and requires that the user already have an
16 idea of to where he or she wants to travel.

17
18 Another category of sites are 'activity led' sites. These
19 sites specialize in vacation packages or accommodations suited to
20 one type of activity, such as golfing (e.g., www.golf-travel.com)
21 or diving (e.g., www.diveguide.com). The sites generally either
22 list their 'best' ranked resorts in which to perform the activity,
23 or provide information on accommodations. Generally, no guidance
24 is provided on which is the best vacation spot for any particular
25 consumer. In addition, for those consumers who have not yet

1 discovered that they would like a vacation centered around a
2 particular activity, the sites do not provide any assistance;
3 i.e., the web site will likely only be accessed once the consumer
4 has determined on his or her own that he or she wishes to engage
5 in a particular activity.

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7 Directory sites, e.g., www.brochurebank.com and
8 www.holidaywizard.co.uk, permit consumers to order print brochures
9 from a range of travel operators. The brochures are then mailed
10 to the consumer. While these sites permit a consumer access to
11 information, they present several major limitations. First, no
12 assistance is provided in requesting brochures. Second, there is
13 a limitation on the number of brochures which can be requested.
14 Third, there is a relatively large lag time for receipt of the
15 brochures. Fourth, the consumer still has to sift through the
16 information in the brochures and make a determination as to where
17 he or she wants to travel.

18

19 Other sites, e.g., www.expedia.com and
20 www.holidayswithease.co.uk, allow consumers to search for
21 vacation packages, but are not suitable for consumers who have not
22 yet determined to where they would like to travel; and as
23 discussed above, all other sites require that the consumer know
24 the general region in which he or she would like to travel or have
25 a selected activity prior to choosing a destination. There is no

1 site which interactively guides a consumer who does not generally
2 know to where he or she wants to travel and what he or she want to
3 do while on vacation.

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5 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION
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7 It is therefore an object of the invention to provide an
8 interactive system which, based on interactive engagement with a
9 consumer, selects a vacation destination for a consumer.

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11 It is also an object of the invention to provide a method for
12 interacting with a consumer and guiding a consumer in choosing
13 vacation destinations.

14
15 It is another object of the invention to provide interactive
16 vacation destination selection systems and methods which do not
17 require the consumer to have prior knowledge of where he or she
18 wishes to travel.

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20 It is still another object of the invention to provide an
21 interactive vacation destination selection system and method which
22 inquire of the consumer a 'type of vacation' which the consumer
23 desires.

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1 attributes that satisfy those wants, and then displays comparative
2 data on those vacation destinations.

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4 The consumer inputs his or her personal data (e.g., number of
5 travelers, ages of travelers, when the consumer wants to travel,
6 the length of the vacation, the distance from home the consumer is
7 willing to travel, and a budget range), as well as a vacation
8 category; that is, the vacation defined in broad terms (e.g.,
9 cruise, sun and beach, activity led, countryside, safari, etc.)
10 into the front end of the system. The front end then displays to
11 the user criteria related to the category and selected from the
12 back end data. Each criterion is preferably represented by an
13 image, and the consumer is able to select one or more of the
14 images to identify the consumer's criteria. The images selected
15 are displayed for the user and together provide a visual
16 representation of the type of vacation being sought by the user.
17 The system compares the consumer's input personal data and
18 selected vacation category, as well as criteria related to that
19 category, with the attributes of all vacation destinations in the
20 back end of the system. The system then identifies vacation
21 destinations which satisfy the consumer's vacation wants (based on
22 the selected criteria) and provides to the consumer a detailed
23 objective comparison of vacation destinations having attributes
24 which meet the consumer's selected criteria. It will be
25 appreciated that the system is capable of determining a suitable

1 vacation destination for a consumer even without being provided
2 information as to where the consumer wants to travel.

3
4 Additional objects and advantages of the invention will
5 become apparent to those skilled in the art upon reference to the
6 detailed description taken in conjunction with the provided
7 figures.

8
9 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

10
11 Fig. 1 is a schematic of the interactive vacation destination
12 selection system according to the invention;

13
14 Fig. 2A through 2D together constitute a flow chart
15 illustrating the method of operation of the vacation destination
16 selection system of the invention; and

17
18 Figs. 3 through 19 are exemplar 'screen shots' of the front
19 end interface of the vacation destination selection system.

20
21 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

22
23 Turning now to Fig. 1, according to the invention, a vacation
24 (or holiday) destination selection system 10 includes a central
25 computer 12 operating a back end data module 14 and a front end

1 interface module 16. The back end module may be implemented as a
2 database of criteria and attributes, as described below, and the
3 front end module may be implemented as a database of HTML
4 (hypertext markup language) files and associated image files
5 which, as also described below, facilitate user interaction with
6 the system. The central computer 12 is in communication with one
7 or more user terminals 18 (e.g., home computers) via the Internet
8 or other computer network. That is, the central computer is
9 preferably a server 12, and the terminals 18 are preferably nodes
10 on the network. The terminals 18 include a display 20 which
11 permits a consumer (user) to view the HTML and image files of the
12 front end module 16 of a remotely located central computer 12, and
13 an input device 22 (e.g., a keyboard, mouse, and/or microphone)
14 which permits the consumer the provide input to the computer 12.

15
16 The back end module 14 includes criteria, described in more
17 detail below, which may be important to a consumer in selecting a
18 vacation destination, and which are organized into categories
19 appropriate for the type of vacation and general location
20 selected. Exemplar categories for a beach vacation include:
21 'destinations', 'local area', 'accommodations', 'important for
22 kids', 'things to do', and 'individual needs', which are described
23 in more detail below.

1 In addition, data (or attributes) collected on various
2 vacation destinations and accommodations serviced by the system
3 are stored in the back end module and assigned to the appropriate
4 criteria. Attribute includes, with respect to particular
5 destinations and accommodations, the cost, the particular
6 activities offered, features of the locality, food options, etc.
7 For example, if a particular modern hotel located on the beach has
8 both a luxury and standard rooms and a pool, and is located just
9 outside a historic village and also has access to various water
10 sports including sailing and snorkeling, the hotel will be linked
11 with the relevant criteria in the relevant categories:

12 'accommodations': 'hotel', 'modern', 'on the beach',

13 'luxury', 'standard', 'pool';

14 'local area': 'historic';

15 'things to do': 'sailing', 'snorkeling'.
16

17 According to a preferred aspect of the invention, image files
18 are also assigned to each of the criterion within a category. The
19 associated image file may change based upon a consumer's selection
20 of other criteria. The front and back end modules of the system
21 assess what a consumer wants in his or her vacation destination
22 (based on the consumer's input at the terminal), identifies
23 vacation destinations and accommodations having the attributes
24 that satisfy those wants, and then displays on the terminal

1 comparative data on those vacation destinations and accommodations.

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3 The front end interface module 16 provides an interactive
4 interface which guides the consumer through the selection of
5 criteria desired for a vacation. Then, as described in more
6 detail below, once the criteria have been selected by the
7 consumer, destinations and accommodation having attributes which
8 best meet the wants of the consumer are presented to the consumer
9 for final review by the consumer.

10

11 Referring to Fig. 2A, the front end module first requests
12 that the consumer supply information as to who will be traveling;
13 i.e., who (the name of the consumer inputting the requested
14 information) at 100 and the number of travelers and their age
15 ranges (the number of adults, the number of teenagers, the number
16 of children, the number of infants) at 104. The consumer responds
17 by entering the requested information at 102 and 106. The
18 consumer is also requested to input when he or she wants to travel
19 at 108 (and responds with a month and year at 110), for how long
20 at 112 (and responds by selection of a time period 1-7 days, 10-14
21 days, etc. at 114), how far away at 116 (and responds with 'this
22 continent' or 'far away' at 118), and a budget range at 120 (and
23 responds with a range of per person costs of up to \$500, \$500-
24 \$1000, \$1000-\$1500, \$1500-\$2000, \$2000-\$2500, and greater than

1 \$2500 at 122). Each of the consumer responses 110, 114, 118, 122
2 is stored by the computer.

3

4 Referring to Fig. 2B, the front end module additionally
5 requests the consumer to provide at 124 an indication of the
6 general type of vacation that the consumer is seeking, e.g.,
7 cruise, sun and beach, activity led, countryside, safari,
8 exploration tour, multiple locations, etc. The consumer's
9 response to the request is provided at 126 and then stored. All
10 the above responses, other than the consumer name at 102, are
11 preferably input by the consumer via selection of appropriate
12 check boxes or selection of items from pull down lists.

13

14 Then, referring now to Figs. 2B and 3, the front end
15 preferably, though optionally, presents one or more questions to
16 focus the consumer on what he or she wants to achieve on the
17 vacation. A first question 128 presented at 130 is preferably
18 "How do you want to feel on your vacation?". The consumer enters
19 at 132 his or her typed answer, in their own words, in a text box
20 134. An 'ideas button' 136 is also provided to give the consumer
21 the option at 140 to view previously stored responses of others in
22 order to help formulate the consumer's own answer. The consumer
23 may at 142 select one of the previously stored responses as his or
24 her own answer as an alternative to typing his or her own
25 response. After the user has entered or selected his or her

1 answer, a 'done' button 144 is activated to store at 146 the
 2 answer. Referring to Figs. 2B and 4, a second question 148 "What
 3 do you want your overwhelming memory to be?" is presented at 150.
 4 The consumer may enter his or her own answer at 152 in a text box
 5 154, or view, at 156, and select at 158 the answer of another.
 6 The answer is then stored at 160. The stored answers are used in
 7 a postcard file, described below, and for access by others seeking
 8 to formulate their own responses.

9
 10 Based upon the consumer's previous responses, criteria
 11 (organized in categories) designed to elicit more particular
 12 information from the consumer are prepared for presentation to the
 13 user. Referring now to Fig. 2B, if any one or more categories
 14 from the standard category set ('destination', 'local area',
 15 'accommodations', 'important for kids', 'things to do' and
 16 'individual needs') are not appropriate in view of the previous
 17 responses by the consumer, the category of criteria may be
 18 eliminated at 162. For example, if no children are traveling, the
 19 'important for kids' category is preferably eliminated for that
 20 consumer. Then, referring to Figs. 2C and 5, based on the type of
 21 vacation earlier selected by the consumer (e.g., 'beach and sun')
 22 and the age of the travelers (e.g., adults and children), the
 23 system displays at 164 on the terminal the remaining categories
 24 166a, 166b, 166c, 166d, 166e, 166f from the standard category set

1 such that the consumer may provide information in order to most
2 appropriately select a vacation destination.

3
4 The consumer may select any of the categories 166a-f to
5 provide information in any order. Selection at 168 of any of the
6 categories 166a-f brings up appropriate criteria by which the
7 consumer can more particularly define what he or she wants to
8 experience on the vacation. Referring to Fig. 6, preferably
9 twelve criteria 170 and associated image files 172 are displayed
10 in a two-dimensional array at 174 for each category. While each
11 criteria has an associated image file, the image files do not
12 refer to particular destinations, accommodations, etc., but rather
13 are intended to convey a feeling which the consumer is trying to
14 achieve on the vacation by selection of the criteria. For
15 example, if a European consumer previously indicated that she
16 wants a European or Mediterranean beach vacation and selects the
17 category of 'destination' 166a, preferably twelve criteria are
18 presented to the consumer; for example, 'sun, sea and sand',
19 'peace and quiet', 'active', 'places to explore', 'dramatic
20 scenery', 'away from it all', 'romantic', 'lively', 'old world',
21 'new world', 'holiday location', and 'cultural location'. The
22 consumer may select at 176 none, one, or more (up to all twelve)
23 of the criteria (by marking check boxes) which best reflect how
24 they want to experience their vacation. The selected criteria are
25 added to a postcard' file, which is described in more detail

below. In addition, several questions (or options) are presented at 178 to the consumer regarding the mode of travel (air, water, land) 180, the distance willing to travel (in travel time) 182, and the weather of the destination (temperature and/or rainfall) 184. The responses to these questions at 186 also constitute criteria and are stored.

By way of another example, if another European consumer previously indicated that he wants a far away beach vacation and is traveling without children, the selection of the 'destination' category will bring up criteria which may differ from the example above; for example, 'adventurous' 172b (Fig. 7) replaces 'places to explore' 172a (Fig. 6).

Referring back to Fig. 2C, after the consumer makes his or her criteria selections in each category in which he or she desires to provide a criteria selection, the system preferably displays at 187 to the user the number of vacation destinations/accommodations remaining in the system that meet the selected criteria.

The consumer may then select criteria from one of the remaining categories shown in Fig. 5. Turning now to Fig. 8, if the category of 'local area' 166b is chosen next, exemplar criteria 188 for selection by the consumer may include: 'on the

1 strip', 'out of town', 'scenic views', 'seclusion', 'modern',
 2 'heritage', 'passion for food', 'glamorous', 'night life',
 3 'restaurants', 'street cafes', 'local markets'.
 4

5 The consumer then selects criteria from another category.
 6 For example, referring to Fig. 9, with respect to 'accommodation',
 7 exemplar criteria 190 include: 'hotel', 'resort', 'apartment',
 8 'villa', 'luxury', 'standard', 'basic', 'modern', 'traditional',
 9 'classic property', 'onsite entertainment', 'gym', 'swimming
 10 pool', 'distance to beach', 'food options', and 'number of rooms'.
 11 With respect to 'distance to beach', 'food options', and 'number
 12 of rooms', options may be selected from a drop down list.
 13 Criteria are selected, and the associated images are added to the
 14 image postcard. Referring to Fig. 10, with respect to the
 15 category of 'important for kids', exemplar criteria 192 include:
 16 'playmates', 'games', 'kids clubs', 'children's pool', 'baby
 17 sitting', 'high chairs/cots', 'children's menus', 'safe disco',
 18 'safe beach', 'play area', '4-5 bedrooms', and 'adjoining rooms'.
 19 Referring to Fig. 11, with respect to the category of
 20 'activities', exemplar criteria 194 include: 'restaurants',
 21 'family eating out', 'shopping', 'street cafes', 'being pampered',
 22 'romantic evenings', 'clubbing', 'bike/car hire', 'beauty spots',
 23 'historic places', 'museums'. Referring to Fig. 12, with respect
 24 to the category of 'individual needs', exemplar criteria 196
 25 include: 'vegetarian meals', 'wheelchair access', 'lift' (or

elevator), 'no dogs', 'pets allowed'. The criteria in each category are reviewed by the consumer and desirable criteria are selected. In addition, while not shown, the consumer may add his or her own criteria. The selected criteria and the associated image files are stored in the postcard file.

After the consumer has completed review of the categories and made his or her selection of desired criteria, the consumer is presented at 198 with a preliminary postcard file 200, as shown in Fig. 13. The preliminary postcard file 200 is a two-dimensional array of the selected criteria and images associated with the selected criteria. If the consumer has selected more criteria than a set maximum number, e.g., fifteen criteria, the consumer is preferably requested at 202 (Fig. 2C), 204 (Fig. 13) to select which criteria to 'keep' and which criteria to 'drop' to bring the number within the maximum number. When required, the consumer indicates which criteria to 'keep' or 'drop' by selection of 'keep' 206 and 'drop' 208 from a drop down list 210 associated with each criteria. 'Dropped' criteria are nevertheless preferably taken into account in evaluating vacation destination recommendations for a consumer. Alternatively, three options may be provided: 'keep', 'drop', and 'remember', in which 'dropped' criteria are not later taken in to account, and 'remembered' criteria are taken into account but given lesser weight than 'kept' criteria.

Referring to Figs. 2D and 14, once the consumer has reduced at 212 the number of criteria to within the maximum number, the consumer is presented with an updated preliminary postcard file 214 at 216. The consumer is then preferably requested, at 216 (Fig. 2D) and 218 (Fig. 218), to prioritize the remaining criteria by ranking the several, e.g., five, most important criteria to the consumer. The consumer ranks at 220 the most important criteria preferably with a pull down list 222 under each of the remaining criteria. This operates to weight the ranked criteria more heavily in the selection process, but preferably does not operate to eliminate the other criteria in the updated preliminary postcard file as factors in the selection process.

After the criteria have been ranked by the consumer, the system makes a determination of which vacation destinations most meet the needs of the consumer. This is done by comparing the attributes of the vacation destination in the system with the criteria of the consumer taking into account the consumer's weighted ranking of the most important criteria. In addition, referring to Figs. 2D and 15, a final postcard file 228 is prepared and displayed at 230 for the consumer. The final postcard file 228 includes the criteria names and associated image files for the 'kept' criteria 232, with the top-ranked criteria 232a displayed most prominently, e.g., across the top of the postcard. In addition, the final postcard file includes the

1 consumer's responses 234, 236 to the initial questions of "How do
2 you want to feel on your vacation?" and "What do you want your
3 overwhelming memory to be?"; i.e., the responses stored at 146,
4 160. In addition, the postcard file includes a link (or
5 hyperlink) 238 to a display of the recommended vacation
6 destinations (which can be selected at 240), a link 242 to a list
7 of the reasons for the recommendations (which can be selected at
8 244), and a link 246 to side-by-side comparisons of the
9 recommendations (which can be selected at 248).

10
11 If the consumer selects the link 238 to the display of the
12 recommended vacation destinations, a display 250 such as shown in
13 Fig. 16 is provided at 252 to the consumer. The display 250
14 preferably includes for each vacation destination 253a, 253b, a
15 photograph 254, a map 256, basic information on the locale 258,
16 the weather 260, a URL (uniform resource locator) hyperlink to
17 more information 262, recommended accommodations 264, prices 266,
18 access 268, and availability 270.

19
20 If the consumer selects the link to the list of the reasons
21 for the recommendations, a worksheet 272 such as shown in Fig. 17
22 is provided at 273 to the consumer. The worksheet 272 indicates
23 the choices made with respect to the 'destination' 274, 'local
24 area' 276, and 'accommodation' categories 278. The worksheet
25 displays the number of destinations remaining 280 after each

1 criteria selection by the consumer. The consumer is able to edit,
2 via selection of 'edit' buttons 282 and 'on/off' buttons 284 the
3 reasons and see how such changes affect the recommendations. For
4 example, Fig. 18, the worksheet 272 indicates that by changing
5 various criteria (permitting greater rainfall at 286 and not
6 limiting the accommodation to a resort at 288) additional
7 recommendations 290 for a vacation destination are made by the
8 system. Throughout the interactive selection process the number
9 of possible options which satisfy the selection criteria are shown
10 thereby ensuring the consumer can see the number of remaining
11 options.

12
13 Fig. 19 displays the side-by-side comparisons 292 of the
14 recommendations, permitting the consumer to analyze in detail
15 various details of the recommendation (e.g., size of the
16 accommodations, full board options, distance to beach, number of
17 swimming pools, restaurants and bars, whether the accommodations
18 have a fitness center, sauna, casino, or golf course, etc.) to
19 facilitate making a final choice. Finally, the consumer may
20 select one of the recommended vacation packages for purchase. To
21 facilitate the purchase, a referral link may be provided to an
22 online ticket and hotel booking service, a phone number for a
23 travel agency may be provided, or the front and back end modules
24 may include the necessary forms and data, which are known in the
25 art, to complete the transaction.

1 By providing basic information on the travelers, and general
2 information on how far the travelers are willing to travel, the
3 preferred weather conditions, a budget range, and the selection of
4 criteria from one or more categories, the system 10 is capable of
5 determining a suitable vacation destination, even without being
6 provided information as to where the consumer wants to travel.

7
8 There has been described and illustrated herein an embodiment
9 of an interactive system for the selection of a vacation
10 destination and a method of selecting a vacation destination.
11 While a particular embodiments of the invention has been
12 described, it is not intended that the invention be limited
13 thereto, as it is intended that the invention be as broad in scope
14 as the art will allow and that the specification be read likewise.
15 Thus, while the consumer is presented with a number of categories
16 from which to choose criteria, the consumer does not need to
17 review the criteria in all the categories; an appropriate
18 selection of a vacation destination may nevertheless be made by
19 the system, provided that criteria in a non-reviewed category are
20 not essential to the consumer's enjoyment of the vacation. In
21 addition, while particular criteria have been disclosed for use
22 within the various categories, it will be appreciated that other
23 categories, e.g., sports available, and other criteria within the
24 disclosed categories may be used as well. Furthermore, while the
25 vacation destination selection system is preferably implemented

1 with a global computer network, it will be appreciated that the
2 system may also be implemented in another interactive medium, for
3 example, an in-travel agency kiosk, portable digital media, e.g.,
4 CD-ROMs and DVDs, or via interactive television, such that a
5 stand-alone (non-networked) computer system or television is
6 utilized to implement the system. Moreover, while a front end
7 module and back end module are discussed as distinct databases, it
8 will be appreciated that the modules may operate as portions of a
9 common database. In addition, while two preferred focus questions
10 are disclosed for preferable presentation to the consumer, other
11 or additional questions may be used. Moreover, while the focus
12 questions are intended to aid in consumer selection of criteria as
13 well as be displayed on the postcard, it will be appreciated that
14 a natural language parser may be used to incorporate the response
15 into the vacation destination selection process. Also, while the
16 front end is preferably implemented in a series of HTML files, it
17 will be appreciated that other file types (e.g., VRML, JAVA
18 applets, etc.) may also be used to implement the front end. It
19 will therefore be appreciated by those skilled in the art that yet
20 other modifications could be made to the provided invention
21 without deviating from its spirit and scope as claimed.